

# Analyzing Early Christianity: Structures and Functions of Interpretation in the Canonical Gospels\*

LORENZO L.D. INCARDONA\*\*

*Titolo italiano: L'analisi del Cristianesimo antico: strutture e funzioni dell'interpretazione nei Vangeli canonici.*

**Abstract:** In this paper, I analyze early Christianity, describing its attitude toward interpretation. Observing continuities and discontinuities with Judaic tradition, I connect innovations of Christian theology to structural transformations of Sacred Texts. The core of the analysis is the comparison between canonical Gospels and the Old Testament. Exegesis methods, corpus and literary genres, and narrative structures are some of the variables taken into account.

**Key-words:** interpretation; exegesis; Christianity; Judaism; cultures analysis.

## 1. Introduction

According to Lotman (1975), cultures can be defined through their attitude towards their own signs. Looking at early Christianity as an interesting case of rising culture, we can use this suggestion to explore and analyze early Christianity, starting from its attitude towards interpretation. Early Christianity needed to distinguish itself from both Judaic and Hellenistic cultures. From a semiotic point of view, it is interesting to observe how the self-definition of Christian culture was deeply connected to transformations in structural aspects of interpretation, as well as in structural aspects of text analysis and use. Analyzing Christianity as a system of semiotic systems (Eco 1975), namely

---

\*\* The first version of this paper was presented at the Conference “Religious Communication”, held at Monash University in Melbourne (26–27 November 2009).

\*\* Università di Bologna.

as a culture, means, above all, analyzing how early Christianity used to analyze texts.

Texts are the ground upon which we can build and validate our thoughts about cultures. In this paper, I will describe fractures and continuities between Judaic and Christian interpretative structures, observing differences and analogies between the Old Testament and the Canonical Gospels. The starting point of this analysis is the commonly acknowledged idea that there is no fracture between Judaic and early Christian methods of exegesis.

Let us consider two citations, the first from the American scholar Karlfried Froehlich and the second from the Italian scholar Manlio Simonetti:

According to the evangelists, the words of Jesus himself contain evidence that he used rabbinical rules like those of Hillel and Ishmael.

(Froelich 1984, p. 8)

I primi cristiani sono giudei: essi perciò non hanno dubbi e remore ad accettare il Vecchio Testamento come rivelazione di Dio a Israele [...] e lo interpretano secondo i modi usuali nel giudaismo di quel tempo per adattarlo alle loro esigenze.

[...] il discorso si sposta dagli aspetti formali della incipiente interpretazione cristiana del Vecchio Testamento ai contenuti di tale interpretazione, e qui il collegamento della Chiesa primitiva con la tradizione giudaica del Vecchio Testamento entra in tensione con la novità del messaggio che proprio il Vecchio Testamento è chiamato ad avvalorare.

(Simonetti 1981, pp. 14–5)

Simonetti implies an opposition between formal aspects of interpretation (methods of interpretation) and contents of interpretation. What I shall try to demonstrate is that these two aspects are not so distinctively opposed to each other. We shall get deeper inside the description of the transformation of exegesis structural boundaries. We shall see how changes in the contents of interpretation are linked to changes in formal aspects other than the following two fundamental variables: the relevant corpus and the formalized exegetical rules. Indeed, continuity between Jewish and Christian cultures is founded on the preservation of these two variables. But fractures are not just

in the contents of interpretation. There are some hidden formal aspects like textual organization of meaning, innovation in literary genres, or cultural hybridization still to be investigated. This is where Semiotics and Philology could meet to give new points of view on traditional subjects relevant to the history and analysis of cultures.

## 2. Renewing the Sacred Text

The first semiotic change we should take into account is the Christian renewal of the conception of the Sacred Text. What is a sacred text? In theology, it is basically a text containing the revelation of God. In semiotics, a sacred text is a node in a network of different cultural practices. It is also a corpus genre. Indeed, it is a set of implicit rules to interpret a set of texts. The corpus genre rules have to be considered like readers' expectations and attitudes to the texts of the corpus. The *Song of Songs* was traditionally interpreted as an allegory, even in a basically non-allegoric exegetic culture like the Judaic one. This was an effect of an implicit corpus genre rule, that we could make explicit by saying: *you will find themes like election or covenant in the sacred text; you will not find an erotic theme in a sacred text, so, if you find it, it is not what it seems to be*. Corpus genre rules could also determine what kind of texts can be part of the corpus itself. The readers knew something about the literary genres admitted in the corpus. We know this from the traditional classification of the *Tanakh* in groups of texts (*The Law, The Prophets, The Writings*).

What about attitudes? A sacred text is not used just for the pleasure of reading or to learn something. It is used to regulate social behaviours. That is why I indicated before that a sacred text is a node in a network of practices.

The first structural innovation of Christian literature is about reader's expectations on sacred texts, it is about the renewing of literary genres, or, better, about the renewing of the corpus genre rules. As I said, I shall focus on the Canonical Gospels. However, similar considerations could be done about New Testament texts like Saint Paul's *Epistles*, which are the earliest Christian writings we know.

I'd like to stress the fact that considering the Gospels sacred texts is not just a matter of theological contents. The "scandal" of Christianity started with the preaching of Jesus. But it was far from over as the textualization of His preaching was a kind of revolution itself. Obviously, Gospels were not written in Hebrew. They are surely not texts like the ones in the *Torah*, but they are not a prophet's vision either. They could have been included in the *Writings* section (the most heterogeneous one), but they have some features that make them completely different from Old Testament texts.

### *2.1. Gospels are a corpus*

Gospels themselves are a corpus. This is a strong distinctive feature. They are a New Testament even before the definition of a Christian canon, since inter-textual relations between them are too strong to be integrated into an older and settled system of texts. What does make Gospels a corpus? They share almost the same narrative content; they are all written in the same language, different from the traditional language of Judaic Scriptures; they use a similar terminology and they have the same kind of textual segmentation (they are divided in "pericopes"). A corpus is a form of expression of textuality that can have its own meaning. The meaning of the corpus in Judaic and Christian cultures is the persistence in time and space and, thus, the veracity of the revelation of God.

### *2.2. Gospels and the interpretation of the Old Testament*

Another important distinctive feature is that Gospels often contain interpretations of Old Testament passages. This could sound strange, but I am talking about explicit narrations of interpretation practices of sacred texts inside a sacred text.

Gospels became sacred texts when they started to be used as liturgical texts;<sup>1</sup> when they started to be used to shape early Christian communities; when they started to be conceived as the completion of

---

<sup>1</sup> The early use of Gospels as liturgical texts has an evidence in their textual organization in pericopes (Fuchs 1954).

older sacred writings; when they started to be conceived as the word of God Himself. In Judaic culture, exegetical rules and sacred texts' interpretations were traditionally transmitted orally. They were the contents of the so-called *Oral Torah*. When this knowledge began to be written down (around the III century), it found its place in texts like *Mishna* and *Talmud* or in the literary genre/method of interpretation of *Midrash*. Even if these Judaic texts were highly important, they were not the Sacred Scriptures.

Some objections may be moved to these considerations. I shall summarize them through a quotation from Ithamar Gruenwald:

In discussing the history of a Scripture, or of a religious tradition in general, two complementary stages may be distinguished: revelation and interpretation. Scripture, as distinct from interpretation, would figure in the eyes of many people as a collection of writings whose chief asset is the fact that it claims divine inspiration for itself. [...] However, three crucial problems somewhat spoil the intellectual appeal of such distinction. To begin with, not every book included in Scripture is divinely inspired in the full sense of the term. Among these are most of the books included in the *Ketuvim* [...]. Then, too, it is important to note that the process of interpretation has already begun in Scripture itself. This fact has recently become part of the standard understanding of Scripture, and it certainly results in blurring the clarity of the previously mentioned distinction. And finally, it must be observed that some interpretations of Scripture (e.g., the *pesharim* of the Qumran Community) also claim for themselves the status of divine inspiration.

(Gruenwald, quoted in Fishbane 1993, pp. 7–8)

The first point claimed by Gruenwald should be discussed in a theological frame, so I shall not consider it. The second problem is much more important to us. Gruenwald wants to say that many texts in the *Ketuvim* are mostly re-writings of other Old Testament texts. Since re-writing is a kind of interpretation, this could have been an objection to my thesis. Nevertheless, I talked about explicit narrations of interpretation practices, so my hypothesis remains valid. The third problem can be considered a support to the thesis I am discussing. Indeed, Qumran Community was an innovative sect of Judaism as much as Christianity was. Using the words of Gruenwald, the structural innovation I am talking about could actually be the progressive blurring of revelation and interpretation itself in Christian culture. We could

talk about early Christianity as a culture of analysis, underlining the theological importance of the early Christian construction of an inspired model to read texts.

### 2.3. *Gospels' exegesis forms*

The more we get deep into this analysis, the more we find out that the relationship between Judaic and Christian cultures can be described as a fractured continuity. Beyond the differences in the conception of the sacred text, there are evident similarities in the literary forms of expression of texts' interpretations. Gospels contain exegetic forms similar to the ones institutionalized in the Oral Torah. The scholar Ellis observed that Gospels contain at least two kinds of *Midrash* forms of text comments: "with opening text" and "with opening question" (1992, pp. 96–7). Early Christian literature preserves not only the same exegetical rules of the Judaic tradition, but some of its exegetic forms of textualization. However, we shall see how important it is that the Gospels' exegetical passages are framed in the new, hybrid literary genre of the "words and deeds of Jesus": a kind of biography with theological purposes. We shall also see how important the innovative idea of a sacred text interpreting itself is.

All I have said about the renewal of the sacred text is coherent with some insights of the French semiotician Louis Panier:

Concernant la Bible chrétienne, le corpus n'est pas seulement un principe de clôture du texte "inspiré", c'est aussi un principe pour une règle de lecture (entre les récits de l'AT et ceux du NT), et un principe (sémiotique) d'organisation du sens. Rappelons cet adage patristique: "Novum Testamentum in Vetere latet; Vetus Testamentum in Novo patet".

(Panier 2008,, pp. 8–9, footnote 37)

The New Testament is supposed to be an inspired way to understand inspired texts. All developments of Christian exegesis are based on this principle. Saying that the corpus is a semiotic principle of organization of meaning means that placing new texts in the older corpus modifies completely the older corpus coherence and its internal and external textual relations.

Just to complete this brief overlook at the dialectics between fractures and continuities, I should mention other semiotic features that preserve continuity between Judaic and Christian concepts of the sacred text. Gospels are all full of allusions and implicit citations of the Old Testament. This is a characteristic shared by all Old Testament texts. There are also local textual strategies that produce similar meaning effects of continuity. The use of the genealogy in the opening of Matthew's Gospel is the clearest example.

### 3. Further considerations on Christianity and interpretation

We have pointed out the importance of interpretation for the definition of early Christian cultural identity by just comparing the global characteristics of two corpora. It is interesting to find out that different methodological approaches have come to similar results. In his famous work *Mimesis* (1946), Erich Auerbach, comparing the Homeric poems with the Bible, observed that since the Old Testament wants to represent the universal history, it forces believers to fit every new historical development to the universal narrative and theological frame inherited by tradition. Exegesis is the only instrument to do so. Exegesis means texts' interpretation. Interpretation is properly the human device to manage acquired notions in changing environments, in changing experiences. According to Auerbach, when Judaic culture faces the rise of new and unknown worlds (new cultures, new semiospheres), it needs to preserve the tradition (the acquired notions). This need easily becomes one to widen and modify the tradition itself. Auerbach observed that the deepest work of widening and transforming the Judaic religious sphere was made by Early Christianity. This could sound obvious, but it is interesting to analyze the textual and cultural semiotic structures this observation is founded on. Moreover, this means that text interpretation had a central role in the definition of Christian literature features and of Christian cultural identity. This means that exegesis is a crucial variable in the semiotic system called Christianity. In this direction, I am also trying to re-build the bridge between contemporary sciences of language and the hermeneutic tradition. German theologian Ernst Fuchs, for instance, wrote that early

Christianity needs to be understood as an independent linguistic phenomenon (1954).

Let us go back to Auerbach. The scholar said that the widening of the Judaic religious sphere was made by Christians in two ways: trying to include the Roman Empire in the divine project of salvation; and trying to convert pagans to the new religion. What does this mean in a semiotic frame?

On the textual level, we could say that Christians modified another fundamental variable of text identity: the reader. The reader is a formal variable, it can be defined as a textual strategy of communication (Eco 1979). Gospels address Holy Scriptures no more to Jewish people only. The Old Testament has now to be considered as a message to every human being, as well as the preaching of Jesus is.

On the global cultural level, Christians modified the deep narrative structure of the Judaic interpretation's model of other cultures. This could be summarized as a transformation from an inter-cultural attitude based on exclusion to an inter-cultural attitude based on inclusion. The ancient Judaic culture used to interpret other cultures on the basis of a narrative frame where the Lord of the Armies orders Israel to keep others out: a polemical relation between narrative subjects. The new Christian culture interpreted other cultures as subjects to manipulate. Christians wanted to modify other cultures' features to make them coherent with their new system of values. This could sound a rough consideration, but sometimes this is the price to pay for generalization. However, this generalization can be nuanced through the semiotic micro-analysis of texts. In order to tackle this subject more in-depth, I suggest a comparison between the deep narrative values expressed in Exodus 23: 23–4 and in 1 Corinthians 1: 22–24.

I shall connect the textual and the cultural level. First, I shall try to describe some important consequences of the change of addressee in the Gospels. Then, I shall try to prove that this change in the textual communication strategy is a local determination of a wider phenomenon of cultural hybridization.



#### 4. Luke 4: 24–27

It is commonly known that the Gospel of Luke is clearly addressed to an audience of converted pagans. I will analyze Luke 4: 24–7 to show how this change of textual strategy matches with three other levels of semiotic changes: 1) inter-textual relations between the Gospel of Luke and other Gospels; 2) inter-textual relations between Gospels and Old Testament; 3) structure of interpretation.

24 And he said, 'Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his hometown. 25 But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land; 26 and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. 27 And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian'<sup>2</sup>

Luke uses two citations from the first and the second book of Kings (1 Kings 17: 8–24; 2 Kings 5: 9–14) to justify the fact that Jesus did not make miracles in His hometown, Nazareth. Matthew and Mark also tell the same story (Matthew 13: 57; Mark 6: 4), but they do not use citations from the Old Testament. Luke needs to tell ex-pagans or potential Christians that their place in the Judaic tradition was prefigured. He needs to tell them that it is not the first time that the God of Israel communicates with pagans. Thus, text interpretation is relevant to define differences between Gospels; then, these differences are relevant to define different degrees of cultural widening shown by early Christian literature. Moreover, it is easy to observe that a pagan supposed-reader is necessary to justify the coherence between these citations and the actual context of enunciation. Indeed, this connection is not as logical as it could seem at a superficial reading.

How can these citations modify intertextual relations between Gospels and Old Testament? Changing its supposed-reader, Luke's Gospel becomes a kind of device to change the focus of attention in Old Testament reading. Thus, Gospels are not just a completion of the Old Testament, as it is usually said in Christian theology. They are instru-

---

2 New American Standard Bible.

ments for the selection of new topics. Gospels invite readers, even pagan readers, to read Old Testament to find and magnify minor themes like “communication between God and people other than Israel”. As I already mentioned, quoting Panier, Gospels are a “principle for a rule of reading”. Now this should be much more clear.

As we look at the interpretation’s structure of this passage from Luke, we could find out that it is the application of one of the traditional Judaic exegetical rules. However, if we look at its narrative frame, we find a fracture within tradition, since the interpretation is used to justify the behaviour of the interpreter himself. Again, we find the recursive pattern of the self-interpretation in a different form: indeed, this pattern is now manifested as a structure of the Gospel’s narration. In this case, we can observe the overlap of different supposed-readers. Quotations from the Old Testament try to make Jesus’ behaviour more acceptable to Jewish people, while blinking at pagans, as we already observed.

When I said that New Testament is a sacred text interpreting itself and when I alluded to the fact that interpretation practices are narrated in a literary frame similar to that of biographies, I wanted to introduce this fundamental conclusion: the core content of Christian theology, the incarnation of God, His human-shape appearance in history of mankind, is manifested in many intertwined structural aspects of early Christian culture, if we look at it as a system of semiotic interactions and boundaries. Contents and forms of expression cannot be treated separately, as the traditional semiotic notion of *sign* teaches us. This could also be a way to better understand the ancient rabbinical prohibition about writing down Oral Torah (cfr Carucci Viterbi in Sierra, 1995):<sup>3</sup> rabbis must have been well aware that formal changes are content changes. We are observing it, as we are describing transformations in the forms of textuality, in the structure of interpretations and in the relations between cultures, which are all systematically connected to well known content’s changes in theology.

---

3 Stemberger (1995) criticizes the idea of a strictly binding prohibition. Anyway, from a semiotic point of view, the mere existence of a debate on this subject is very significant.

## 5. The Septuagint

We cannot analyze early Christian culture as though it was the product of some strictly defined choices of communication strategies and signification structures, arisen from nowhere. It would be inadequate to the nature of the object. That is why we need to connect the observations on texts to global historical and cultural conditions. We need to discover if there is evidence that semiotic phenomena we are considering can be framed in a global cultural process like the already mentioned transformation of the type of relation between ancient Judaism and other cultures. We should investigate basic transformations in the conditions of possibility of Christians' semiotic strategies of cultural hybridization.

How could we talk about cultural hybridization of ancient cultures? We still have to analyze ancient texts, but, this time, paying attention to their placement in semiospheres. *Semiosphere* has been defined by Lotman (1985) as the space outside of which semiosis is not possible, outside of which the production of meaning is not possible.

A good link between Christian textual and cultural innovations and the global cultural environment in which they arose is the Septuagint. The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Old Testament. It was commonly used by Jews during the first century BC. After the spreading of Christianity, Jews tended to not use it anymore. Indeed, the Septuagint was widely used by Christians and that was one of the crucial factors for Jews to abandon it. For Christians, the Septuagint was very useful as they wanted to extend Judaic tradition to the pagan world. The Septuagint was a text meaningful for both Jews and Christians; then, it became meaningful just for Christians, but it was used as a cultural heritage to be exported in the Roman-Greek culture. But Roman-Greek culture was the same background that made the production of the Septuagint possible, as Roman-Greek culture was the hegemonic one.

Thus, the Septuagint is a perfect place to study ancient cultural hybridization for both its context of production and its later use. It is a borderline text, placed at the intersection of three systems of signs, values, and beliefs. Many studies have analyzed the Septuagint as an ideal ground to find mutual cultural influences between Judaic and

Hellenistic cultures. Is the Septuagint the ideal ground to explain early Christianity as an extreme declension of Hellenistic Judaism too?

This is a very controversial question. There are a lot of studies on it and many opposite answers. I shall take a shortcut. I will rephrase the question in these terms: are there textual features of the Septuagint that could be associated to the Christian cultural attitude of inclusion? The answer is yes, if we agree with the convincing paper by Johan Lust (in Krasovec 1998, p. 162), on which I focus now. After a deep textual analysis, based on the comparison between the Masoretic text and the Septuagint, Lust says that:

The references to military violence, abundant in the Masoretic Text, are replaced by allusions to financial oppression. Also, the Lord's final intervention, heralded by his messenger, implies an everlasting peace. The emphasis on the peaceful character of the Lord, and of his plan with the world is one of the typical features of the LXX.

What does this mean for us? The differences between Masoretic text and The Septuagint are relevant to the definition of a less exclusive inter-cultural attitude. Thus, the Septuagint prepared the cultural background for the Christians' new goals of including other cultures in their own system of belief. The Roman ideal of political *Pax* melted into the religious ideal of a universal system of belief. The idea of a universal religion could also explain what many observed about the birth of the concept of orthodoxy (e.g. Perani 2003). The settlement of dogmas is a typical Christian cultural feature; while the so called rabbinic Judaism built a not-systematic theology.

## Conclusions

This analysis has shown how interpretation was the central engine for the birth and self-definition of Christian culture. In this case, *interpretation* must be understood in all its wide range of meaning. Interpretation is textual translation; it is formalization of exegetical rules; it is innovation of a literary genre. Semiotics is a fundamental methodological perspective to understand these complex phenomena. The description of religious cultures is based on a wide range of semi-

otic variables still to be deeply investigated. I have just tried to show the importance and the difficulties of describing cultures from a semiotic point of view. More than any other semiotic object, cultures need to be understood through differences. The challenge of the analyst is identifying relevant differences even when the culture itself tries to hide them; and to show analogies when the culture itself tries to underline distinctions. Beyond these difficulties, maybe the so called Religions of the Book are the best research field to refine semiotic models for the analysis of cultures. Indeed, they can be seen as cultures in which the delicate relationship between cultures and their components (texts, habits, rites...) is best defined.

## References

- Auerbach E. (1946) *Mimesis – Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, A. Francke, Bern.
- Eco U. (1975) *Trattato di semiotica generale*, Bompiani, Milan.
- . (1979) *Lector in fabula: la cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi*, Bompiani, Milano.
- Ellis E.E. (1992) *The Old Testament in early Christianity. Canon and Interpretation in the Light of Modern Research*, Baker Pub Group, Grand Rapids.
- Fishbane A.M. (ed.) (1993), *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought and History*, State University of New York Press, Albany.
- Froehlich K. (1984) *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, Fortress, Philadelphia.
- Fuchs E. (1954) *Hermeneutik*, R. Müllerschön Verlag, Bad Cannstatt.
- Krasovec J. (ed.) (1998) *Interpretation of the Bible*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield.
- Lotman J.M. (1985) *La semiosfera*, Marsilio, Venice.
- Lotman J.M. and B. Uspenskij (1975) *Tipologia della cultura*, Bompiani, Milan.
- Panier L. (2008) *Sémiotique et études bibliques. Évolution méthodologiques et perspectives épistémologiques*, [www.ec-aiss.it](http://www.ec-aiss.it), Web, data di accesso 28.05.09.
- Perani M. (2003) *Personaggi biblici nell'esegesi ebraica*, Giuntina, Florence.
- Sierra J.S. (ed.) (1995) *La lettura ebraica delle scritture*, EDB, Bologna.
- Simonetti M. (1981) *Profilo storico dell'esegesi patristica*, Istituto Patristico Augustinianum, Rome.
- Stemberger G. (1995) *Introduzione al Talmud e al Midrash*, Città Nuova Editrice, Rome.